

# Bangladeshi police attack protesting garment workers

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Bangladeshi police have cracked down on a series of strikes by garment workers over wages and conditions, including by those who survived the Rana Plaza building collapse. The police actions underscore the fraudulent character of the government's promises to improve the oppressive conditions facing millions of apparel workers.

The Rana Plaza building imploded on April 24, killing at least 1,129 people, mainly garment workers, and injuring more than 2,000. Five apparel factories were located in the building, which had been illegally extended to eight stories. Despite obvious cracks appearing in the walls of the building the previous day, its owner claimed there was no danger and factory owners forced reluctant employees back to work.

Hundreds of former Rana Plaza garment workers and relatives of injured or dead workers protested near the collapsed building site on June 5. They were demonstrating against the failure of the government and the Bangladesh Garments Manufacturers and Exporters Association (BGMEA) to provide promised compensation and back wages.

Police shot guns into the air, fired tear gas and then charged the protesters with batons, injuring about 50. Justifying the assault, police officer Sheikh Farid Uddin claimed the workers were blocking the road and had started to damage public transport vehicles.

Angry workers rejected the accusation. Fatema Khatun, a survivor of the building collapse, said the police attacked them simply because they were protesting. She told the *Guardian*: "We did not commit any vandalism but still the police opened fire and used tear gas."

Just two days earlier, police attacked a protest involving over 5,000 workers from Dynasty BD Limited in the Ashulia and Gazipur industrial belts, on

the outskirts of Dhaka. The demonstrators were demanding overdue wages and the dropping of legal charges against workers for recent industrial action. Nearly 30 people were injured after police broke up the rally with batons and rubber bullets.

The Dynasty Group suspended production for several days at its factories, fearing further unrest. The previous week, 20,000 garment workers rallied in Ashulia to demand better pay. Since the Rana Plaza collapse, ongoing strikes and protests have reduced garment production in the industrial area by 20 percent.

The demonstrations have spread. On June 5, thousands of garment workers from seven factories in Dhaka's Tejgaon industrial zone also protested on the Tejgaon-Mohakhali and Gulshan road links, until dispersed by police. Two days earlier, Sepal Garments employees stopped work over a management proposal to lengthen the work day from 10 to 12 hours without overtime pay. Workers complained that the work day had already been extended by one hour with no lunch break.

The unrest is not limited to garment workers. Transport workers in northern Rangpur division also struck for 48 hours last week to call for higher wages and allowances, and an end to police harassment.

The Awami League-led government fears that labour unrest among the country's garment workers could produce a major political crisis, involving not only the working class but the rural poor. In most cases, young female workers from the poverty-stricken rural villages are the main breadwinners for their families.

On June 6, the government announced a six-member board to fix a new minimum wage for the garment sector. Mikail Shipar, the secretary of the Ministry of Labour and Employment, said the board would make "its recommendations at the earliest possible time" and

the wage would come into effect from May 1 next year.

The lengthy delay in any wage rise, despite ongoing protests by workers since last year, makes clear that the government is determined to maintain the “international competitiveness” of the garment industry at all costs. The minimum monthly wage, the lowest of any garment exporting country in the world, was last increased in November 2010, to 3,000 taka (\$US38), after mass protests and strikes.

At the same time, in the wake of the Rana Plaza disaster, the government and global retailers are making cosmetic moves to salvage the image of the country’s clothing industry. Around four million workers are exploited in onerous and unsafe conditions, manufacturing apparel for major transnational corporations. The garments that they produce account for 80 percent of Bangladeshi exports.

In a crude public relations exercise, Reshma Begum, 19, who was rescued from the Rana Plaza rubble after 17 days, was given a job at the five-star Hotel Westin in Dhaka last week with a monthly salary of \$US450—more than 10 times a garment worker’s wage.

Britain’s Minister of State for International Development Alan Duncan visited Bangladesh last week and called on international retailers to take responsibility for how their products were made. “There are large defects, and these exist because the setting of standards of employment rights, health and safety at work and building construction have not kept pace,” he said.

However, Duncan’s overriding aim is to protect the public image of British retailing giants operating in Bangladesh and to ensure that the country remains a cheap labour platform. The British government has promised \$28 million for safety and skills training for the garment workers. But this money, even if finally provided, will not address the many safety issues in the country’s garment factories.

A recent survey by the Bangladesh University of Engineering and Technology found that about 60 percent of the buildings that host garment factories were vulnerable to collapse. The team examined 100 of the 600 buildings containing the country’s 3,000 garment factories, making visual surveys, taking soil tests and studying the original plans. In many cases, residential and office buildings that were converted to

house factories were completely unsuitable for industrial purposes.

The structural safety of industrial buildings is just one aspect of the terrible conditions facing garment workers. Since 2005, more than 1,829 apparel workers have been killed in disasters, including fires such as at the Tazreen Fashion factory last November, when at least 112 people died. In none of these cases has an employer been charged.

On June 6, 600 workers fell sick after drinking contaminated water from a well at the Starlight Sweater Factory in the Gazipur industrial area. They complained of searing stomach pains and vomiting, and had to be sent to the Uttara Modern Medical College Hospital. Dr Sabbir Ahmed Khan, head of the urology department, told the media that the treatment was paid for by the doctors’ welfare fund, because the employer refused to cover the costs.



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